

Practical Ways to MANAGE YOURSELF

MODERN MANAGEMENT MADE EASY: BOOK 1



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Increase Your Capacity and Finish More Projects

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Practical Ways to Manage Yourself

Modern Management Made Easy, Book 1

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Practical ink

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*In memory and honor of Jerry Weinberg who told me I should
write a book about rewiring management logic.*

For Edward Rothman, my first management mentor.

*And, for Mark, Shaina, and Naomi, as always. Thank you for
managing me.*

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Any mistakes are mine.

Introduction

Several years ago, I wrote a series of articles I called “management myths.” They each described one way I’d seen managers act so that the manager created the opposite result from the one they wanted. Yes, the manager’s actions created precisely the opposite effect.

I wrote a myth a month for 36 months.

I assumed as the world transitioned to agile approaches or approaches where teams, managers, and organizations needed more resilience, that managers would change. I thought no one needed to read about the myths in a world where we want collaborative, cross-functional self-managing teams.

I was wrong.

As I worked with more managers who wanted to use agile approaches, I saw several problems with their management practices:

- The practices barely worked for non-agile teams. Teams succeeded in spite of their management.
- The practices prevented any team’s adaptability and resilience.
- The practices didn’t work for managers who wanted to lead and serve others.

And, in an organization attempting to transform to an agile culture? The more the managers tried to make old patterns work, the less agility anyone exhibited.

Why did these smart people behave in ways that didn’t make sense?

They didn’t know any better.

These managers had never witnessed useful management, never mind excellent management. They tried to do the best job they

could. And, they perpetuated what they'd experienced, or possibly even learned in school. They practiced what they'd seen—the old ways of management.

It's time for real modern management.

Modern managers face enormous challenges. Too many managers feel as if they are stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

How can you become a modern manager when the system, the culture, is based on old thinking and old practices?

Carefully.

I've divided the original essays into three books. The first—this one—asks you to consider how you can manage and respect yourself to build congruence and integrity in your actions.

Book 2, *Practical Ways to Lead and Serve (Manage) Others*, explains how you can serve a harmonic whole. The entire team or group can then work together in a culture of transparency and trust.

Book 3, *Practical Ways to Lead an Innovative Organization*, explores ways to create a human and innovative culture in your organization, so you can use the ideas of trust and integrity to create a place where people want to work.

You might feel many constraints in your situation. As you read these books, you might nod and say, "Yes, I can do that." And, you might shake your head at some ideas and say, "Not going to touch that here. Nope, not at all."

I do hope you consider each essay as a possible experiment for your management practice. You have options.

Who Are the People in These Essays?

You might wonder about my use of names and gender in these books. For example, you might never have seen women as senior managers. I have seen men and women as senior managers. I've been a senior manager.

My experience tells me that a given gender does not equate to great or unfortunate management skills. Neither does a person's country of origin or any other kind of individual demographic.

To help you see what the management world could be, I've created parity across genders. I've used names of people I've worked with or admired. Even with that, I've changed all the names to protect the innocent and the guilty.

I've had the good fortune to meet and work with male and female managers worldwide. In almost every circumstance, the managers have done the best they could, given their company's environment and culture. The manager's gender didn't matter.

The company's environment mattered more than anything. You might—or might not—see the variety of people in roles that I write about here.

Through my work, I've recognized several principles that create great management and build healthy organizational cultures:

1. Clarify purpose—for you, the team, and the organization.
2. Build empathy with the people who do the work.
3. Build a safe environment. People work better when they can trust you, their colleagues, and the organization as a whole.
4. Seek outcomes by optimizing for an overarching goal.
5. Encourage experiments and learning.
6. Catch people succeeding.
7. Exercise value-based integrity as a model for the people you lead and serve.

All three books build on these principles.

If you can exercise these principles, you will gain these effects:

- Respect—for yourself, for the team, and for the purpose of the organization.
- Trust—possibly with boundaries—to encourage the behaviors and outcomes you want.
- Team-based approaches to working at all levels of the organization.

All three books explain some of the trickier parts of management. You'll get the most value if you read all three books.

As you read the dialogue in the essays, remember that I said most of these things to my managers. You might see these conversations as insubordination.

I didn't feel as if I was insubordinate. I used the principle of congruence to have conversations where my manager and I cared about the outcome, each other, and discovered our best possible outcome for the situation.

You and I are different people. How I frame conversations might not work for you. You will find *your* best ways to describe the situation and influence your manager.

You can practice human and humane management that produces superior results for your organization. You can respect yourself, the people you serve, and the entire organization as well as customers. You can act with integrity. And, you can have empathy without being a pushover.

Management is an honorable profession. We need managers—great, congruent managers who can use their interpersonal skills to get the best out of themselves first. Then, they can extend those skills to the people they serve and across the organization.

My best to you. I hope you enjoy reading these essays and that you ease your way into modern management.

Let's start.

1. Management Starts with Managing Yourself

Great management starts with managing yourself.

You might share several commonly held beliefs: that management starts with managing others. Or, that management starts with organizational design so other people can accomplish the work.

Great management includes those two parts. However, the way we, as managers, manage our work, our beliefs, and our actions around other people is the best predictor of great management.

Our assumptions and experience color our approach to management. Especially if you've never seen great management.

Great managers work to serve, not control. They make sure they create trusting relationships with others. They do that by delegating, coaching, and creating an environment where everyone can contribute.

Great managers manage themselves to serve others.

The reality is that too many managers feel pressure to deliver or "perform." Too many managers interpret that pressure as:

- As the expert, they can't delegate the work; they must do the work.
- They can't trust others to do the work correctly; they must micromanage the work to make sure the work is done right.
- They can't admit they don't know something.
- They can't admit any mistake because then no one would believe they know what to do or how to do it.

Management is not easy. Ever. But managing like that makes your job much more difficult than it needs to be.

When you try to meet those pressures to “perform,” your actions disconnect the people you lead from the work. You might interpret that disconnection as a “lack of engagement” on the part of the people you serve.

Here are some indications your management actions might not work for you:

- You think of management as “herding cats,” even though you see humans in the office every day.
- When you try to help, you make the situation worse.
- You wonder why people react negatively to you when you try to do your job or offer help.

I’ve had helpful managers and disastrous managers. They all *thought* they were doing a good job.

Helpful managers facilitate everyone’s work through various leadership approaches. These managers create and refine the organizational culture in which people can deliver their best work and thrive. When managers balance the needs of the people inside the organization with the needs of the customers to achieve business outcomes, everyone wins.

I love helpful management.

And, there are other kinds of managers. These people tend to micro-manage. They tend to do the work themselves instead of teaching others. They make decisions when they have no data and they dither when they have data.

Worse, these not-so-helpful managers often insert themselves into the work. They either insist on doing the work, or they create control points where people need to tell the manager what they’re doing. Way too often.

These not-so-helpful managers rarely admit when they make mistakes. They might be afraid to admit they aren't the smartest person in the room. Or, they think admitting a mistake is a sign of weakness. Or, they attempt to ignore the problem and continue with no acknowledgment they created a problem. Worse yet, they are genuinely unaware that there is a problem.

When we manage ourselves, we help people grow and learn. We explain the purpose of the work and the constraints around the work. We delegate. We coach. We build trust so we can clarify the direction and then trust people to do a great job.

Managers who manage themselves don't insert themselves into the work. They have the managerial capacity to remove impediments and serve the people they lead.

Managers who manage themselves exhibit congruence, more often than not.

1.1 Discover Your Management Balance with Congruence

You have a tough job as a manager. Your managers might pressure you to "do more with less." You might be going through an agile transformation and wondering what your job really is. You might have to hire—or worse—lay off or fire people to manage to the organization's demand or revenue. You might have other issues that challenge you in your role as a manager.

How do you balance all these competing pressures? Consider congruence, as described in *Software Quality Management, Vol 2: First-Order Measurement* [WEI93](#). I have found the idea of congruence helpful as a frame for my management thinking.

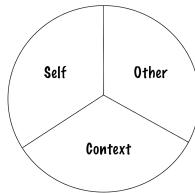


Figure 1.1: Congruence

Congruence is a way to find your balance between you and your needs, the other person and their needs, and the entire context.

If you ignore the needs of the other person, you might blame people. One senior manager once said to me, “Those testers. They keep finding problems. We can’t ship when I want to.” The senior manager blamed the testers for doing their job. Notice that he didn’t blame the developers, the people who—due to pressure from him—had created the problems.

If you ignore yourself and your needs, you might placate or appease other people. One senior manager said, “I always say yes to any requests from my peers. I must accommodate their needs.” When I asked him about the costs in terms of burnout, he said, “It’s up to us to make sure the organization succeeds.” His department had the highest turnover in the entire organization.

If you ignore the people in the situation, you might be super-reasonable, thinking you can apply *only* reason to the situation. One team had suffered a tragedy—their technical leader had died suddenly from fast-moving cancer. Six months later, the team still had not recovered. In fact, they left “his” chair vacant in their meetings. When I asked their manager what he had done to help the team move through their grief, the manager said, “I’ve thought about it. The team should have finished grieving by now.”

If you ignore all three: yourself, the others, and the context, you act in irrelevant ways. One senior manager hated conflict. Some people on his management team excelled at arguing loudly. Just when his management team would get to the meat of the argument,

he would start to talk about the weather. Or his favorite sports team. Anything other than the issue at hand. He acted in an irrelevant way.

These managers weren't inherently stupid, bad, or wrong. They were incongruent. And, they didn't realize the effect their words and actions had on the people they served.

If you don't think about the whole—self, other, and context—you have a lopsided view of the system. In management, if you don't think about yourself, the other people, and the environment, you have a lopsided view of everything: the people you serve, their teams or group, and the organization as a whole.

You might blame others if you stop thinking about them as humans. (A quick check: do you talk about resources instead of people?) You might placate others if you stop thinking about yourself—you appease or accommodate others at a cost to you or the people you serve. You might consider actions that make life more difficult for all the people if you don't think about the context, the entire organizational system. If you don't want to deal with any of the people or the context, you might act in an irrelevant way.

I often think of management as trying to stay balanced on a multi-sided balance beam. Lean too far one way, the people lose respect for you and their peers. Lean too far another way and your management thinks you can't do your job. Lean too far the third way and you don't do right by the customers or the organization.

Where to Start with Congruence?

Consider starting with yourself when you think about congruence. When I ask myself if I'm blaming or placating or being super-reasonable or irrelevant, I find it easier to see my balance or my lack of balance.

Managers have a lot to consider to discover and maintain their emotional and management balance.

In my experience, the worst managers show their incongruence when they implode in some way. In *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* [SUT07](#), Bob Sutton has an entire chapter on the damage bad managers do and the consequences to the people they manage, their products and organizations, and their reputations. Being a jerk has grave consequences.

1.2 Manage With Value-Based Integrity

Managers who are congruent put their integrity first. When I think of integrity, I think of how we live our values and how those values create a resilient, integrated whole approach to congruent management.

I look for people who live these values:

- Honesty, which means explaining what you want and admitting when you're wrong.
- Fairness, which means balancing the needs of everyone.
- Consistency, which means others can predict your behaviors within some bounds.
- Truthfulness, which means helping everyone understand the true state of the situation.
- Respect for others, which means creating an environment in which people can do their best work, trusting people to do a great job, and not gossiping about others.

Congruent Values Create Integrity

I've met some managers who thought it was fine to lie to other people. Lying was part of their value system. While they were congruent with themselves and their personal values, they were not congruent with the greater context or the organization.

When an entire organization fails to live these values of honesty, fairness, consistency, responsibility, and respect, the entire organization can fail. Enron, as an example, went bankrupt. The CEO of Wells Fargo was forced to resign.

You might think of other possibilities for integrity. When I start with congruence, I'm more than part way there.

1.3 Self-Esteem Builds Empathy and Respect for Yourself

When you think of empathy and respect, you may first think of other people. That is part of management, and I discuss it in depth in the second book in this series.

For now, consider how you might need to feel empathy and respect for yourself. Do your managers ever ask you to do anything that violates your integrity? If so, and you placate your managers, then you start to lose your self-respect. You might lose empathy with yourself.

You certainly lose your self-esteem.

What's the worst thing that could happen if you say no to those requests?

I was a Director of Software Quality at one unnamed organization years ago. The senior managers asked me to “certify” a release. My role was to “certify” that we had no major problems in the release.

I managed not to laugh out loud when they asked me, because we had *just* finished a meeting where I’d explained about the problems I knew about and the effects of those problems. I asked this question, “What do you want to happen?”

The CEO said, “I want to be able to ship so we gain revenue.”

I said, “Okay, we can remove these features.” I listed them. “And, we can go back to last month’s codebase because the performance was better.”

He shook his head. “Not good enough. The Very Important Customer (VIC) is paying for this because of the features on that list.”

“Want me to explain what’s going on with the software? I can call and explain. VIC and I have built trust.”

“No, I want you to certify the release,” he said.

“But, I’ll break the trust I’ve built,” I said.

“Too bad.”

I said no, and left. I walked back to my office and called my husband to explain I might not have a job later that day. That would have been a problem for us because I carried our health insurance.

Was I nervous? Of course.

Did I regret anything? No, absolutely not. My personal integrity was at stake.

When we exercise our personal integrity, it’s true, we might lose our job or a specific role. However, even *I* have never immediately lost a job. Very few managers lose their jobs if they say, “No,” to a management request that lacks integrity. The people who make those requests *know* the requests are wrong.

This CEO wasn't stupid or bad. He was trying to get a short-term gain for the long-term survival of the company. I am sure he felt as if he was between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

I had enough self-esteem to manage my integrity and congruence. I was able to maintain my integrity. If I'd been a single parent, would I have made a different choice? I'd like to think not, but that wasn't my situation.

Self-esteem drives our congruence, integrity, and empathy. I'm not talking about fake "pumping ourselves up" but about realizing our strengths and weaknesses and managing them. The more self-esteem we have, the more we are able to manage ourselves.

When I have self-esteem, I see how to take myself out of the middle of the work. That means I coach and delegate so other people can practice doing the work instead of—or maybe even better than—doing it myself.

You might like some of the books on this reading list. They can help you explore your self-esteem and how vulnerable you might feel at times:

- Weinberg's *More Secrets of Consulting: The Consultant's Toolkit* [WEI02](#). Don't worry about the title. Everyone needs to understand their self-esteem toolkit. Every manager needs to learn, at the very least, how to say no. This book may help you learn to do so.
- Brown's *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* [BRO12](#). Much of modern management is having the courage to work differently.
- Brown's *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* [BRO10](#). When I realized I couldn't be perfect at all things, I could choose how to exploit my strengths and manage my imperfections. I became a much better manager.

When we are congruent, we can be authentic. That authenticity arises from our self-esteem.

When we are congruent and have self-esteem, we can move ourselves from doing the work to facilitating the work. That's why managers coach and delegate.

1.4 Managers Serve and Lead Others

You may have heard the term, “servant leadership.” Robert Greenleaf coined the term in his classic, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* [GRE02](#).

In *The Case for Servant Leadership* [KEI08](#), Kent Keith defines seven practices of servant leaders:

1. They are self-aware.
2. They listen.
3. They serve the people who work “for” them.
4. They help other people grow.
5. They coach people, not control them.
6. They unleash the energy and intelligence of others.
7. They work to develop their foresight, so they can act instead of react.

When managers act as servant leaders, they enable and encourage the people they serve to do the best job possible. (Keith calls this “Changing the Pyramid.”)

I worry when I hear phrases like these:

- “My” people
- “I own” this department
- “My people know they are accountable” for some task or deliverable.

Managers don't "own" people or departments. People can account for their work for a given task or deliverable. However, accountability does not mean the people know about or can deliver that task or deliverable. (There's a great discussion about responsibility and accountability in *The Responsibility Process* [AVE16](#).)

These ownership and accountability words pervade management in our organizations. However, those words do not explain what managers do.

Managers lead the organization in many ways. Book 3 has much more about organizational leadership. Managers serve others. Book 2 has much more about how to serve others.

One way to lead and serve is to manage the system.

1.5 Managers Manage the System

When I first became a manager, I had to learn how to remove myself from the day-to-day work so I could focus on the team as a whole. I didn't manage the work. I managed the system, so everyone could do a great job.



Managers manage the system so everyone can contribute.

I discovered I needed to help the system of work in these areas:

- The bottlenecks in the team. Sometimes, people need tools. Sometimes, people need feedback or to learn something specific. Depending on what people need, I offer feedback or help someone else offer that feedback. I might coach or ask who else would be a better coach. I might train or offer specific training.

- Information people needed to make good decisions. I often discovered I was the bottleneck for their decisions. I learned how to delegate.
- The time people spent either stuck on a problem or pursuing dead-end solutions. Too often, people were reluctant to say they were wrong or stuck—especially in public. I made it possible for people to admit they were wrong or stuck and to fix a problem fast because I modeled that behavior.

As a manager, you need to know enough about the work so you can ease the way to a better environment. Your job is *not* to jump in and do the work for them. They can't learn if you do the work. And, you can't be an effective manager if you do a lot of technical work.

What does knowing enough about the work mean? You need to know enough to see when people are stuck. You need to know the dynamics of the work. You can see bottlenecks, even if your team or group can't. You can see if anyone needs more training even if they might not know. Your job is to take a longer-term perspective to see if the team or group needs tools or different metrics, or where a different approach might help.

Your job is not to impose or inflict help on a person, team, or group. However, your role is to observe the dynamics and see where a little change might help. For example, if you're a technical manager, you might see a team struggle to agree on a particular architecture or design. Your job isn't to decide *for* the team. Your job is to create an environment where the team can find a way to decide. I'll explain more about this in [Managers Can Help Unstick Problem-Solving](#).

You might think your job is to manage everyone's work. That's not a manager's role. Managers create the environment in which the people they serve can succeed. Management is a specialization of leadership.

In most of my management jobs, I didn't have time to do any technical work. If I had tried to do that work, I would not have been

a successful manager. I valued management enough that I learned how to delegate.

As a first-level manager, the more technical work I delegated, the more successful I became. I sometimes offered my coaching, when I still knew about the work. However, I often asked the person having trouble if they knew of someone who could coach them. They did. I facilitated the coaching experience. I didn't do the coaching when I was no longer sufficiently technical.

As a middle manager, the more I worked with the managers I served to solve problems, the more successful I became. I used the same coaching stance—I coached where I could and offered to help find someone where I could not.

And, as a senior manager, I made sure the managers I served understood the strategy, the purpose, and our constraints. That's how we succeeded. I often coached middle managers about how they could facilitate other teams and people to complete the work.

Managers often need to help themselves and others learn or explore other options. That's coaching. Once people see they have another option, they need time to experiment, so they can practice these new skills.

Every person needs to learn at their own pace. A coach might help the person see other options. And, implementing those options requires self-learning. People don't learn new skills in one day—every skill takes time and practice to master.

When you solve problems, the people you serve can see *your* solutions. They might not see your thinking, but they see solutions.

When you practice delegation, you might not be able to see how others think about the problems. They might solve problems differently—maybe even better than you did. If they do, rejoice in their success. Then, you can learn what they saw so you can incorporate that knowledge into your work. If you're worried about people doing it "wrong," consider instead ways to think about how to delegate and

catch people doing the work right. (See [Are You the One to Solve This Problem?](#) and [Does Your Team Need You So They Can Work?](#) for more details about coaching and delegation.)

Too many people think managers know it “all” or need to know it all. Nope. That’s impossible.

Managers are human. Managers clarify the purpose or set the strategy or direction. Managers help teams and groups create the environment in which they can succeed. Managers see where people need to learn and enable that learning.

That means managers don’t succeed by controlling other people’s actions. Managers can only succeed if they see themselves and manage their actions and reactions.

1.6 Consider These Principles for Managing Yourself

When managers manage themselves first, they adapt the principles in these ways:

1. Clarify your purpose so you can serve others. As a manager, you provide value by creating an environment that makes it possible for people to do their best work.
2. Build empathy with the people who do the work. Learn what makes them tick and realize people live up or down to your expectations. You see how they can contribute to the whole and how they might grow to contribute more.
3. Build a safe environment. Psychological and physical safety matter. People can discuss and experiment in a safe environment. They tend to trust and respect each other more.
4. Seek outcomes and optimize for the overarching goal. When you delegate problems and outcomes, all for the purpose of

the overarching goal, the team can decide how to engage in that challenging work.

5. Encourage experiments and learning. When you decriminalize mistakes, you can admit when you are wrong. That encourages other people to admit when they are wrong—and to ask for help. That one admission can create a culture of experimentation and learning.
6. Catch people succeeding. When you admit you don't know and when you take time to think, you can see where people succeed—often, without you. People can build on their successes—and so can you.
7. Exercise your value-based integrity as a model for the people you lead and serve.

You'll notice I didn't include transparency or communication in these principles. That's because if you use all these principles, you will communicate effectively. You will be as transparent as you can be with the people you serve.

You create an environment where people can do their best work.

Given these principles, consider how you can build your management excellence.

1.7 Build Your Management Excellence

I've practiced some form of management for more than 35 years. I've managed inside organizations as an employee and as a contract manager. I've led volunteer organizations in a variety of leadership positions. I've managed myself as a consultant for the past 25 years.

I've coached managers, consulted to managers, and led leadership and management workshops.

I've worked with some super-smart people who did not realize that their management actions led to reactions exactly opposite of what they wanted. These people repeated the "typical" management practices they'd learned, or that HR requested, or that their own managers used on them.

These people wondered why they didn't get the results they wanted. You might be one of these people, too.

Management—especially congruent management—can create an environment in which everyone works to the best of their abilities. Congruent managers balance the needs of everyone: yourself, the various others, and the context. That's management excellence.

Incongruent management often causes people to respond to incentives, fear, or some numeric target. People are smart. If you reward or create fear for a certain kind of action, people will act to achieve the reward or avoid the fear. These people won't necessarily want to work that way, or feel good about their work, but they will act in response to the rewards or fear.

When you manage yourself first, you can then ask people to be the best versions of themselves, all day, every day. You'll see what people are capable of—including yourself.

I've framed each of these chapters as questions for several reasons:

- I'm asking you to consider alternatives for your current behaviors. Questions help create divergent thinking, so we can consider alternatives. (For more information, see *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas* BER14.)
- My suggestions might not fit you or your context. How can you adapt my questions to your context?
- Questions might help you see different actions.

I'm not asking you to change your beliefs. Your beliefs arise from the results of your actions and interactions with others. If I can

suggest an experiment for you—and you try it—you’re more likely to subsequently change your belief.

Management excellence doesn’t mean you need to be perfect. No one is perfect all the time. You can practice the management skills that lead to congruence and management excellence.

Become a modern manager and build ease in your management, starting with how you manage yourself.

2. How Valuable Are Managers?

I used to joke that managers got paid the big bucks to make decisions. Back when I worked for a hardware-software company, one of the people I served asked me how much money I made. I was a little surprised and then answered him.

He was a senior architect and earned about 30% more than I did. Neither of us had bonuses. It was all straight pay.

He was quite surprised. “Why don’t you make more money if you’re more valuable than I am?”

I said, “We’re both valuable. You’re making design decisions that are quite costly to change and that will last a long time. The cost of change for your decisions is quite high.”

He nodded. “That’s true. My design decisions last many years,” he said.

I continued. “The decisions I make are much less costly to change. I can change my mind and not screw up the company’s future.”

He frowned. “But you hire people. If we hire a bad person, that screws everything up.”

“True,” I said. “And, I can assess their value as soon as they start. I can offer feedback. I can coach the people who work with a supposedly bad person to offer feedback. And I always have the option of firing that person. I’m not afraid of acting sooner rather than later to correct a difficult situation.”

He laughed. “Yup, you’re not afraid more than anyone I’ve met.” He paused. “That alone makes you more valuable than other managers.”

“Thanks,” I said. “When I think about the value of a person, I think about the cost of their decisions and the cost of change. Sometimes, managers are more valuable. But not always.”

I hope you think about the value of your work as you read the following myth.

2.1 Myth: I Am More Valuable than Other People

Belinda, the VP of Engineering, gathered her thoughts. *I am not looking forward to this conversation, but I need to have it. Again.*

Dan, the Director of Development, arrived on time for his one-on-one. “Hey, Belinda. Do you think we need all of our time? I have another meeting in ten minutes.”

Belinda frowned. “I’m pretty sure we’ll need all of our time. Do you want to tell anyone that you won’t be there on time?”

Dan shrugged. “They’ll wait for me.”

“I hope not,” Belinda said. “I have a number of things on my list.” Belinda stood up and grabbed her notes and notebook. She walked over to her visitor’s table and sat down with Dan. “What’s been going on this week with you and your teams?”

They discussed the problems that Dan’s teams had solved and what remained.

Dan then said, “I have to tell you, I’m really enjoying this new role.”

“Oh? Tell me more.”

“Well, I get to tell people what to do. I really get to boss people around.”

“Do you find that effective?” Belinda asked. “Can you provide me with some examples of how that works for you?”

“Sure,” Dan replied. “In the Alpha project, I told that team, you know, the one with Vijay, Susie, and those two other people whose names I can’t remember? Well, I told them to get off their tushes and get down to business. We can’t wait all day for them to ‘spike’ their work. We need results. And what did they do? They finished their work. I sure told them.” Dan preened.

Belinda paused for a minute. “Dan, do you remember anything about developing software?”

“Sure, but my needs are so much more valuable now. You asked me for an estimate. I gave you an estimate, right?”

“Yes, but what you gave me was meaningless,” Belinda said. “You intimidated the team. You threw your weight around and acted like a bully. You can’t even remember the names of all the people who work for you.”

Dan leaned back and crossed his arms. He arched one eyebrow.

“I don’t want a single-point estimate,” Belinda said. “That’s not useful. I want something I can work with, but that’s not the point here.”

Dan arched the other eyebrow.

“When you disregard the fact that people work hard to provide you good data, you belittle their work,” Belinda said. “You might not like the way these people work, but that’s not up to you. They have chosen to work that way, and as long as they produce results, they can choose to work that way.”

Dan opened his mouth as if to say something.

“I’ve got more,” Belinda said. “When you don’t know the names of the people you serve, you act as if you are more valuable than the people in your group. You’re not acting as a servant leader, which is what I need from my managers. Great managers serve the people who work for them. Yes, they also serve their managers. Middle managers are stuck in the middle. I serve my managers, and I serve you, which is why I’m offering you this feedback.”

Dan shook his head slowly. “I’m not so sure I know what you mean.”

“Okay,” Belinda said. “When you tell people to stop spiking, what do you think will happen?”

Dan’s eyebrows came together. He frowned. “They’ll just get on with the work, right?”

“Well, they might. If they do, they have no idea how long something will take. If you then ask for an estimate, it will serve you right if they answer ‘Christmas’ and don’t tell you *which* Christmas. I bet these smart people will ignore you and continue doing whatever they were doing before. You will marginalize yourself.”

“I’m doing that?”

“Yes. The problem is that managers are not *more* valuable than technical people. You can’t believe your own press. Managers provide different value.”

Dan started to shake his head. “What do you mean ‘believe your own press’?”

“Look,” Belinda said. “You can use that manager title to tell people what to do. You can tell them how big the estimate should be. You can tell them any number of things, and the telling might even work for a while. However, when you do that, you’re telling people how to think. What do you think could happen?”

Dan tapped his fingers on the table. “Well, they might stop telling me what *they* think.”

Belinda nodded. “Worse, they might stop thinking altogether and wait for you to decide about almost anything useful.”

Dan sighed.

Belinda said, “Managers are valuable when they serve their teams. Managers are valuable when they create an environment in which people can solve problems. Managers are *not* valuable when they puff out their chests and say, ‘Look at me, I’m the manager.’ When you put your needs first, you are not helping anyone.”

Dan sat there, stunned. “But you gave me all these responsibilities for projects. I have to deliver them.”

“*You* don’t deliver the projects. You facilitate the teams to deliver the projects. You have management responsibilities to create and refine the environment so people can do the work.”

“I thought I had more responsibilities.”

“You do. Management responsibilities differ from delivering the work,” Belinda said. “Especially as a middle manager.”

Dan nodded. “My work isn’t the same as when I managed one team,” he said.

“Middle managers ‘deliver’ when they work through their teams,” Belinda said. “You don’t do them yourself. That’s why you have people who deliver the actual products and services, the work. You ask people how long the work might take, right? You decide on the project portfolio, along with the other directors and me, because we make decisions as a management team. You help your teams problem-solve. You provide meta-feedback and meta-coaching. If people ask you to remove management obstacles, you do so. That’s how you can manage the fifty to sixty people you have in your group—through your managers. How else could you manage that many people?”

Dan crossed his arms again.

“Look, you serve the teams—the people. They don’t serve you. Just because you have a title with ‘director’ in it does not make you ‘more’ than anyone else. Your title means your decisions are more strategic for the organization. Other people make strategic product decisions. You might help with those, too, but you are not more valuable than they are.”

“Well, I never thought about management like that,” Dan said.

Belinda smiled. “Would you like to talk some more about what management is?”

2.2 Middle Managers Have a Difficult Balancing Act

Many middle managers find themselves in tricky situations. They have a senior manager who says, “Gimme this project,” or “Deliver that report,” or “Do this with half the time/budget/people.” That senior manager—and often the middle manager—is too far from the technical work to understand the details of it. They resort to mandates, demands, or blaming the project teams because they don’t understand what it takes to deliver a product.

We have all seen the demands roll downhill and the environment that creates. It’s not pretty. It’s incongruent.

Any of those behaviors—mandates, demands, blaming—are all signs of incongruence. At the very least, managers who mandate, demand, or blame miss the other person in the interaction. Too often, they also miss the context. These managers only think of themselves and how things affect their own situation.

2.3 Great Management Is Servant Leadership

When managers think of themselves and not the other or the context, they are rarely proactive when it comes to great servant leadership. (See [Managers Serve and Lead Others](#).)

When I acted as an order-taker from my managers, I could not retain my personal integrity. You might feel the same.

It’s a lot more work, but when managers understand what *their* managers want (i.e., the problem) and then provide solutions, organizations run better. For example, you might need to first clarify the overarching purpose for this work. You might not be able to

create perfection, but you can create a better environment for the people you lead and serve.

Managers can create an environment where the team can solve the problems. That's the role of the servant leader.

It's not about managers being more or less valuable than the rest of the team; all team members contribute in their own way. What is important is *how* managers contribute. If managers don't provide servant leadership, they don't provide the leverage for everyone else. They are not creating an environment in which people can do their best work.

Bossing people around doesn't sound like valuable management to me. Does it sound that way to you?

Here's how I often think about valuable management: reducing the cost of a decision or the cost of change from those decisions.

2.4 Assess the Cost of Your Decisions or the Cost of Change

Your organization may well expect you to boss other people around. When you tell other people what to do, you make decisions *for* them. See more at [Identify Your Delegation Boundaries](#).

What if your organization wants you to boss other people around? First, decide if that fits your ideas about management. You might want to review [Managers Serve and Lead Others](#).

How much experience do the people you serve have with making decisions? Many organizations have a culture of bossing people around. You might have to support your team or group with facilitation coaching so they learn how to decide together.

Now that you've thought about yourself and the other, think of the context.

Consider these measures: what did it cost in time for *you* to make a decision? How long did it take for you to recognize you needed to change the decision? If that decision was ill-advised, what did it cost you to change that decision?

Think back to your last couple of weeks of work. Make a list of your answers to these questions:

- How often did you arrive late to a meeting? How long did the other people have to wait? This is the meeting wait time cost.
- How many times did you override a decision a person or a team made because you were the manager? This is a cost of insufficient trust.
- How long did people have to wait for your decision for a specific problem? This is a real Cost of Delay, due to the problem of [Indispensable Employees Create Bottlenecks](#).

You might see other examples of delay-based costs.

Maybe you couldn't help being late to all those meetings. Maybe you had to override the original decisions. Maybe you needed more data to make a decision for that particular problem.

I'm not suggesting your actions or decisions were wrong. Your actions and decisions might have been exactly right. I am suggesting you're increasing the cost of your decisions with those delays. Each delay increases the risks in your system of work.



Effective managers reduce delays in the system of work.

My question is this: Is there a way you can reduce the cost of your decisions? Try to imagine ways to:

- Delegate more decisions so you don't have to participate in as many meetings? See [Does Your Team Need You So They Can Work?](#)

- Extend more trust. See [How Much Do You Trust the People You Serve?](#)
- Be less indispensable as a problem solver. See [Are You the One to Solve This Problem?](#)

The longer it takes to make a decision, the less likely we are to reassess that decision. That's the Sunk Cost Fallacy—we spend so much time and invest so much emotionally in a decision that we don't want to change our minds.

The more decisions we are reluctant to change, the more fragile the system of work becomes. (See *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* [TAL12](#) for more details.) The more decisions you make, the fewer chances other people have to make decisions. With those fewer chances, people learn less from their decisions. Although you might appear more valuable in the short term, your ability to work through other people diminishes over time.

You may have experienced these consequences of appearing to be more valuable:

- At some point, what you know will no longer be useful. Your knowledge has a shelf life.
- You will have a difficult time creating a succession plan if you want to move around in the organization.
- The people you serve will not have the capability of managing their own work if you solve problems for them.

Refer back to your list of the times people waited for your decisions. Then ask yourself:

- Am I the only one who can make these decisions? If so, do you have options to help other people learn to make these decisions?
- Are these decisions relatively easy to change as we learn more? If they are, maybe do nothing until you know more.

- Have I waited too long to make decisions? If so, what would you need to do to make a decision closer to the time everyone needs the decision?

When is the last responsible and *reasonable* time you and everyone else can make a decision?

2.5 Consider the Value You Offer

Where do you offer value? Do you coach team members or teams? Do you clear organizational problems and impediments so the teams and team members can do their work? Do you see the various needs for education or training and then arrange that training?

Here are some ideas for thinking about the value you offer to the organization:

1. How many people have you unwedged or unblocked this week? Sometimes team members may not realize they are stuck trying to solve problems. If you are able to recognize that someone is stuck and point them in a more useful direction, then you've accomplished valuable work.
2. How many of the people you serve were able to accomplish more based on decisions you made or impediments you cleared? When you do that, you offer leverage to others.
3. How much strategic work did you do this week? Managers set the strategy for their teams and groups. Then they put the tactics in place to make the work happen. Strategic goals are long-term goals, so you'd expect to make only a little progress on strategic work each week. But the effort you invest and the progress you make certainly count.
4. How many crises did you prevent? Every time you solve a problem and prevent a disaster or crisis, you've given the people you serve ways to progress.

5. How many meetings were you able to cancel? Unfortunately, too many of us work in meeting-happy organizations. If you are able to cancel meetings that don't actually help move a project forward, then you've done wonderful management work.

You might offer value in other ways. As you read through this book—and with any luck, the other two books—you might see ways to offer more value to the people, the customers, and the organization.

Valuable managers balance the time they spend in the work with the time they spend creating the environment for other people to do great work.

Consider how much time you spend *in* the work rather than on the system of work.

More from Johanna

I consult, speak, and train about all aspects of managing product development. I provide frank advice for your tough problems—often with a little humor.

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- *From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams: Collaborate to Deliver*
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- *Readings for Problem-Solving Leadership*

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Johanna